

Descendants of Black Adirondack Pioneer Reunited After Nearly 50 Years



An emotionally overwhelmed Margaret Hayden (hidden) is comforted by her brother, Victor, as their sister Joan (left) and brother Oscar respond at the Morehouse family reunion. Photo by Rob Fountain, courtesy Plattsburgh Press Republican

“Christmas Gift!” is an expression from slavery days. In some African American families, it can still be heard on Christmas morning. The first to say “Christmas Gift!” receives the first gift. Last Christmas, Robert LaGroome Jr., gave his aunts Joan Marie Morehouse Queen and Margaret Ruth Morehouse Hayden of Baltimore, Maryland, the best Christmas gift ever. He surprised them with the news that he had found their Adirondack brothers Oscar and Victor Morehouse who his aunts had not seen in nearly 50 years. After their mother died, Joan and Margaret were sent to live in Maryland. Ironically, Maryland is where their great-great grandfather John Thomas escaped from slavery in 1839. But they knew nothing about him until they called their brother Oscar in Vermontville, New York. Oscar and his wife Donna had only recently learned about John Thomas themselves from NCUGRHA president Don Papson who had researched his story.

There was a lot to share, and the Morehouses decided to have a summer reunion. Town of Franklin Supervisor Mary Ellen Keith, who has known Donna Morehouse for more than 40 years, said she wanted it to be a Town event.

The Morehouse reunion couldn't have happened on a more perfect day. It was a cloudless, short sleeve summer day in Vermontville-- just right for a picnic-- and Town Supervisor Mary Ellen Keith organized a big one. Before the program and the eating began, several people including Rochester documentary filmmaker Travis Lewis (who taped the day's festivities) joined Mrs. Keith at the Union Cemetery. Respects were paid to John Thomas, his wife Mary Ann, and their son-in-law Stephen Warren Morehouse. Donna Morehouse was there. She and Oscar live less than a mile and half away. Since learning the story of John Thomas, Donna has been decorating the grave sites of her husband's ancestors with American flags and red, white and blue flowers.

John Thomas was a fugitive slave from Queen Anne's County Maryland who got his start in the North Country when the philanthropist Gerrit Smith granted him 40 acres in Franklin County.



Photo by Mitchell Ray

By 1872, Thomas had carved a prosperous 200 acre farm out of the wilderness. He was “much respected in the community” as “an honest, upright and fair dealing man” and “a good citizen.” His son-in-law, Stephen Warren Morehouse was a veteran of the Massachusetts 54th, the heroic black Civil War regiment made famous by the film *Glory*.

The story of John Thomas and his descendants is the quintessential American freedom story, and on July 21st, people from near and far gathered at the Kate Mountain Park pavilion to celebrate it. The story was beautifully illustrated in a ten foot display created by Vivian Papson. Reenactor Cliff Oliver Mealy portrayed the tragedy and triumph of Thomas' journey from slave to self made man. Don Papson announced he had traced the lineage of the Morehouse children's maternal grandmother, Mary Hazzard, to Revolutionary War veteran Eli Hazzard. Robin Caudell, who, like John Thomas, was born on Maryland's Eastern Shore and settled in the North Country, said knowing his story had given special meaning to her life. Before the reunion, Robin spent hours searching for the Indian connection. She knew how important it was to the Morehouses that their mother, Elizabeth Gorrow, was born into the Wolf Clan on the St. Regis Mohawk reservation which is known today as Akwesasne.

On July 21st, the Morehouses publicly embraced one another after a 47 year separation. They embraced the lost history of their family, and the Town of Franklin honored one of its pioneers.

John Thomas broke the chains of bondage in Maryland. But over time an awareness of his legacy of liberty in New York was lost to his descendants and to the Adirondack community which regarded him as an American citizen.

Now his story is a Christmas gift for everyone.

For an in depth report of the Morehouse reunion, read Robin Caudell's Plattsburgh Press Republican article, “Braided Roots.” 1) Google Plattsburgh Press Republican 2) Type Braided Roots in the Search box in the left column 3) A page will come up with the article's subtitle in blue. After nearly 50 years apart, family reunites. 4) Click on the subtitle, and Robin's article will appear on your screen.



The Jabez Parkhurst house before restoration began

Underground in Fort Covington

Tunnels. Say “Underground Railroad” to someone, and nine times out of ten, they will tell you the story of a house with tunnels. Sometimes they are in the most unlikely location. How about at the old Parkhurst place in Fort Covington, a half mile from the Canadian border? Historian Frederick Seaver even thought it “strange” that prominent abolitionist lawyer Jabez Parkhurst “should have taken the risk” of providing refuge for a fugitive in his home “when it would have been so easy and apparently so much safer simply to have hurried him over the line.”

David Streeter was raised across the street from the Parkhurst place. He told Seaver he “distinctly” remembered it “was a refuge for fugitive blacks.” When a boy, he “saw a number of them there, two or three at a time occasionally.” And “wagons often rumbled past... late at night...when they were heard people commented that a train was moving on the underground railroad.” Streeter's testimony forced Seaver to conclude, “Apparently Mr. Parkhurst was at little pains to conceal his work.”

Now it seems that perhaps Mr. Parkhurst *did* conceal some of his Underground Railroad activity, and the Streeters may have even been part of the operation. Everyone in town knows Christopher Nye now owns the long abandoned Parkhurst house and is making it habitable for his young family. And people are coming by to share stories--tunnel stories. Chris has heard so many tunnel stories, he decided to investigate them. According to one rumor, the Streeter house basement has an entrance to a tunnel which once went under Covington street to the Parkhurst house. A town official claims he once saw a map pinpointing the tunnel's location. The town had to keep track of it when they put in a water line. Chris is hoping to earn the trust of the people who now reside in the Streeter house. He imagines one day they will permit him to look for the tunnel entrance in their basement.

The most convincing tunnel story Chris has heard came from heavy machinery operator, Ronald Lauzon. Chris Emailed us that Ron approached him one day and “expressed his remorse that he had actually filled a portion of the secret tunnel himself. 15 years ago he was hired to tear down and re-build the foundation of my carriage house (a.k.a.barn). As he worked on his backhoe, the area he was working on suddenly caved in. He turned off his equipment and examined the area to see what was happening. To his surprise, he was looking into an underground tunnel leading from the barn to the house.”



As it looks now



PSUNY Upward Bound students on a visit

Ron went inside to share the news with the then owners, but they “showed no interest, only anger that he wasn't getting the job done. He said they yelled at him, ‘Fill in that goddamn tunnel right now, we pay you by the hour to level the ground, not look for holes.’ He then found several stones and filled in the area with them. He expressed remorse at having done this, but believed that he really didn't have a choice.”

One day a former groundskeeper stopped to tell Chris there was a tunnel entrance in the basement and asked if he had found it. Chris thinks he may have--in the southeastern corner. A group of Upward Bound students from Plattsburgh State University took a field trip to the Parkhurst house this summer to see what they could find. Chris thinks they may have helped uncover the beginning of a tunnel that turns into the yard. He would like them to return in the fall and continue their work.

Say “Underground Railroad” and people naturally think *Tunnels*. Will the Parkhurst house tunnel stories always remain rumors or will they prove to be true?

Jabez Parkhurst was president of the of the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society for a number of years and a Vice President of the New York Anti-Slavery Society. He served in the state assembly from 1833- '34 as an Anti-Mason. Ten years later he ran unsuccessfully for the assembly on the Liberty Party ticket. Christopher Nye was a socially conscious lawyer before returning to his hometown and becoming Salmon River School District's Financial Officer.